

Citation for published version:

Ma, J & Montgomery, C 2021, 'Constructing Sustainable International Partnerships in Higher Education: Linking the Strategic and Contingent Through Interpersonal Relationships in the United Kingdom and China', *Journal of Studies in International Education*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 19-34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315319865784>

DOI:

[10.1177/1028315319865784](https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315319865784)

Publication date:

2021

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

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Constructing sustainable international partnerships in higher education: linking the strategic and contingent through interpersonal relationships in the UK and China

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Abstract

This paper explores how sustainable international partnerships in higher education might be constructed by linking the strategic and contingent through interpersonal relationships. It aims to foreground the role of individuals in developing and sustaining international partnerships amid an increasingly strategic landscape of higher education internationalization. To present how individuals themselves make sense of their efforts in building sustainable international partnerships in higher education across different contexts, 31 semi-structured interviews were conducted with different administrative and disciplinary staff in two universities in the UK and China. Findings suggest that interpersonal relationships provide a strong basis for sustainable partnerships and it is through contingent networking between individual academics that interpersonal relationships are developed. However, it is through strategic planning by senior academics that interpersonal relationships are embedded in the institution. Hence, an approach to linking the strategic and contingent through interpersonal relationships is thus proposed in order to build sustainable international partnerships.

Keywords

Internationalisation of higher education; sustainable international partnerships; strategic, contingent, UK, and China

[word count 6319]

...should we approach collaborations between universities as individuals approach relationships? Individuals already act as agents on behalf of institutions to foster partnerships, after all. Perhaps we should go a step further and be more explicit about the human part of the process of building partnerships between these elaborate institutions: likes and dislikes, attractions, emotions and feelings...

---Brandenburg (2016)

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Introduction

This paper attempts to highlight interpersonal relationships as the missing link in constituting sustainable international partnerships amid an increasingly strategic landscape of higher education internationalization (Engel, Sandström, van der Aa, & Glass, 2015; Lawton et al., 2013; O'Malley, 2015; Wihlborg & Robson, 2018). By sustainable partnership, we mean long-term substantial relationships interwoven not just by institutions but also by individuals. This is because universities relate to the world not only directly, as institutions, but also through disciplinary networks (Marginson & Sawir, 2006), where individual academics are able to form links and networks from which partnerships should emerge (Eddy, 2010). These informal links or networks of individual academics play a major role in the genesis of sustainable partnership building. Many studies have suggested that human relationships between individuals affect sustainable partnership building (Denman, 2004; Eddy, 2010; Hayhoe et al., 2013; Leng, 2014). These deep human connections developed voluntarily by individuals are able to foster mutual understanding, respect and trust among partnership participants (Leng & Pan, 2013; Leng, 2014; Mwangi, 2017), and these are key features in ensuring that there is enough “glue” to hold partnership participants together (Spencer-Oatey, 2013). Hence to ensure successful and sustainable partnerships more attention should be paid to building human relationships in internationalization (Leng, 2014). However, the central role of human relationships in building sustainable partnerships in higher education seems to be overshadowed by the increasingly institutionalized practices around international partnership development.

Since the 1990s, universities have started to formalize their international arrangements. Documents like *Memoranda of Understanding*, *Sister Institutional Affiliations*, *Letters of Intent*, *Inter-Institutional Agreements*, have been developed to tie higher education institutions together worldwide (Klasek, 1992). Ironically, such institutionally governed partnerships, however, at times still fail to build long-term substantial relationships in the context of international higher education. As Sutton (2010: 61) notes, many colleges and universities find their existing partnerships are “plentiful in number but thin in substance”, reflecting neither strategic planning nor institutional missions. This partly explains why there is an emerging picture of international strategic partnerships in the higher education landscape worldwide (Engel et al., 2015; Lawton et al., 2013; O'Malley, 2015), and why strategic international partnerships and linkages have been identified as the collaborations of the future (Sutton, Egginton, & Favela, 2012). However, research also indicates that the strategic practices of higher education internationalization might pose further challenges to sustainable partnership building due to the contradictory goals of central institutional management and individual engagement on the ground (Hunter, 2018; Oleksiyenko, 2014; Turner & Robson, 2007, 2008, 2009). Recently, Hunter, Jones and de Wit (2018) also point out that the increasingly institutionalized practice of higher education internationalization isolates both academics and administrators from contributing to the further development of internationalization. With such a disjuncture between institutions and individuals in making efforts on internationalization, sustainable partnership building can be affected.

By interweaving both institutions and individuals into the construction of sustainable partnership and turning the spotlight on the role of individuals in constituting sustainable

partnership, this paper contributes to understanding how interpersonal relationships developed by individual academics through their contingent activities might help in building sustainable partnerships in the context of international higher education.

The role of individuals in sustainable partnership building

As argued above, partnerships built upon interpersonal relationships between individual academics appear to be overshadowed by increasingly formalized collaborative agreements. Thus it is important to highlight the role of individual academics in forming their disciplinary networks and thus developing partnerships. As Hunter, Jones and de Wit argue (2018), a partnership such as the Erasmus program is largely facilitated by academics and their departments in cooperation with partners and student exchange initiatives. The mobility of both students and staff help to develop “international competences and social networks abroad”, which are considered to be “important drivers of internationalization within home institutions” in that those people “bring with them knowledge, cultural and social capital and former institutional associations that can boost international engagement” (Klemenčič, 2017: 106). In this way, faculty members may be the initial champions of partnerships (Cooper & Mitsunaga, 2010) and they often “serve on the front line as initiators of partnerships” (Eddy, 2010: 63). In a study of partnership and collaboration in the context of higher education, Eddy (2010: 27) defines the faculty champion as “an individual who advocates for the development of a partnership and who brings together others to engage in the project” and also as someone “not necessarily located in leadership positions”. Rather than engaging in any strategic planning on partnerships, those faculty champions create disciplinary networks upon which collaboration can be built; they can act as a nexus to connect disparate networks; and they provide “ground-level” work to bring partners together, which is argued to be fertile space for partnerships to emerge (ibid). In the context of international higher education, those faculty members constitute traditional faculty collaborators, outreaching, linking and building relationships internationally.

Apart from those traditional faculty collaborators and champions contributing to forming and building sustainable relationships, there are more mobile academics who cross international borders and then settle there. Those particular academics are also considered as contributing to sustainable partnership building. Individuals as transnational academics cross international borders and then work overseas (Kim, 2017). It is common for a foreign research student, after completing their degree, to become a member of the research academic staff in their host country (Kim, 2010). The transnational mobile academic plays a role as international knowledge broker, knowledge trader and institutionalized local career adapter (Kim & Brooks, 2013). Some evidence has shown that the Chinese knowledge diaspora, with its strong attachment to its home countries, maintain strong academic links with the homeland (Hugo & Dasvarma, 2008 in Yang & Welch, 2010). This suggests that a mobile academic who has settled overseas can be an underexplored asset in forming and strengthening links between the home institution and the host one, as diaspora communities “straddle multiple societies and have vital social networks connecting them to home and host cultures” (Fanta, 2017: xxiii).

Despite the positive role of individual academics in creating disciplinary networks from which partnerships develop and flourish, the sustainability of partnerships can be challenged when individuals change their institutions. In that case, partnerships might move with individuals. In this situation, more senior individuals in strategic positions who act as ‘boundary spanners’ may reduce the risk that partnerships move with either faculty champions or transnational academics. The boundary spanner is a hybrid role portrayed as a “network manager” who is able to build “effective personal relationships with a wide range of other actors”; manage “in non-hierarchical decision environments through negotiation and brokering”; perform “the role of ‘policy entrepreneur’ to connect problems to solutions” and “mobilize resources and effort in the search for successful outcomes” (Williams, 2002: 121). Through boundary spanners bridging and enhancing interpersonal relationships, partnerships built by individuals might be able to go beyond individual networks and become more embedded in the institutional structures. Recently, Bordogna (2017) in a study of two long-term Sino-British transnational partnership programs highlighted the role of the boundary spanner as a network manager in developing and enhancing social capital among faculty members involved in the program delivery. In Bordogna's (2017) study, the involvement of boundary spanners in the partnership program proved to be more effective and successful as the boundary spanner played a significant role in building communication, mobilizing resources and strengthening mutual understanding and trust, thus enhancing social capital among partnership participants. This indicates that having such boundary spanners in both institutions might help in enhancing or widening interpersonal relationships among participants in a partnership, although identifying and nurturing such boundary spanners as network managers seems to be another challenge.

In short, it is through disciplinary networks formed by individual academics that institutions indirectly partner with foreign institutions, and this approach is based upon a strong attachment to the relationships between individual academics and their disciplinary networks. But the relationships between the individual and the institution they serve may become weak. This raises the question of how much institutional loyalty mobile academics have and to what extent individual academics may change their personal institutional allegiances (Tapper & Filippakou, 2009). Through disciplinary networks individual academics become mobile (Kim, 2014), and the mobile academic is ‘the synthesis of the totally uprooted wanderer and the totally rooted individual’ (Kim, 2017: 986). Their experiences of crossing borders can generate knowledge as capital for facilitating the development of international higher education partnerships between institutions, and yet also transform their personal identity from that of a traditional academic owing more allegiance to their affiliated institution to that of a mobile academic who may feel more of an attachment to their professional disciplinary networks. Such an argument appears to prove the prediction made by Levine (2000) that faculty members inevitably have become increasingly independent of higher education institutions. One can argue that the global cultural flow is a process of disconnecting individuals from the institution, but it seems also to be a process of reconnecting individuals to the “imagined communities of disciplinary networks” (Marginson & Sawir, 2006). In this sense, instead of being institutionalized within the institution, inter-personal relationships appear to be institutionalized within individual environments which are irregular, plural and beyond

organizational boundaries. That being the case, partnerships developed by mobile academics run the risk of being uprooted from the institution where the individual works if they are not sufficiently embedded within that institution. Thus this paper explores how and to what extent individuals contribute to sustainable partnerships with their pros and cons of developing partnerships through a bottom-up approach, and in particular, how individuals themselves with their diverse experiences make sense of their efforts on building sustainable partnerships in higher education.

The research

This paper is based on a research project carried out in both the UK and China. By focusing on two universities - one in the UK and one in China, one embedded in the Anglo-American culture and the other located in one of the emerging BRICS powers - the paper explores the relevance of the institutions' societal contexts and institutional policy strategies relating to internationalization of higher education. Four criteria are employed to select the universities. Firstly, universities with a history of international engagement are selected, with the exclusion of the newly established ones. This is because the establishment and development of international partnerships need time, and those well-established universities are more likely to produce strategies with relevance to internationalization and partnerships. Secondly, comprehensive universities covering varied academic disciplines are selected, with the exclusion of specialized institutions. This is because those comprehensive universities are able to condition the researcher to gain a wide range of perspectives on sustainable international partnerships at the disciplinary level. Thirdly, universities partnering between England and China are selected. This is because the findings generated from the study are more able to provide practical advice for such universities in pursuing sustainable partnerships. Fourthly, the practicability of access constitutes the last but not the least criterion used to filter out qualified universities. As a result, the Chinese university studied in this research was more research intensive and the UK one was a middle ranking research and teaching institution but lower down the global league tables than the Chinese institution.

In order to investigate individual perceptions and reflections of sustainable international partnerships in higher education, 31 semi-structured interviews - 17 from England and 14 from China - were conducted. The process of collecting and analyzing data fell into four phases. Firstly, a list of criteria was developed to help gather information about the potential interviewees, and thus rule out any who may not be relevant. This contact sheet was constructed with reference to university departments, academic disciplines, job descriptions, personal international experiences, contact details, email responses and recommendations from email responses. Secondly, a total of 31 interviews were conducted from the list of academics in the targeted universities both in England and China (see Appendix for a table presenting contextual information about participants). The interview questions revolved around perceptions of sustainable international partnership; how international partnerships initiate, stagnate, flourish or unravel, and what aspects the participants thought would make international partnership work or collapse. Thirdly, the transcripts of interviews were transcribed and analyzed, generating insights and constituting initial codes such as 'human relationships', 'people' and 'senior academics'.

Fourthly, all the transcripts were put into NVivo Pro for the further coding. The first round of coding aimed to generate codes labelled directly from the language used in the transcripts themselves while the second round of coding was to revisit, merge, rename and create hierarchies. In presenting the data in order to avoid revealing interviewees' identity, each participant is numbered, followed by their academic title and disciplinary background. In addition, people and universities mentioned in the interviews were given pseudonyms.

The story told from both sides

Across both institutions in the UK and China, the most prominent theme regarding the role of individuals in sustainable partnership building was interpersonal relationships, with categories describing how interpersonal relationships develop, thus affecting sustainable partnership building in higher education. Notably, for most individual academics, research appears to be the vital nexus embedded in their academic life. A variety of research activity either through '*[t]he meeting of individuals in a conference*' (Interviewee 7, England) or supervising a research student (Interviewee 1, England) can trigger a potential partnership which may further possibly spread the network of contacts built by academics throughout their research careers. Therefore, not all relationships are strategically pre-planned, and also, not all relationships emerge from a chance conversation between two academics in a conference. Some may emerge from established relationships; for example, '*partner through friends*' (Interviewee 22, China). It is through interpersonal relationships developed by individual academics that are argued to constitute '*a strong basis*' (Interviewee 2, England) or '*a very good basis*' (Interviewee 24, China) for sustainable partnerships, as the *mutual familiarity, understanding, respect and trust* (Interviewee 18, 30, China) within the established human relationships are able to engage people in a long-term substantial relationship. Instead of strategic planning, those human relationships, usually developed after a chance encounter, through contingent activities, such as attending conferences, studying or visiting abroad, are based on shared interests (especially shared research interests) between individual academics. However, because people together with their interpersonal relationships might leave the institution and if that person is the only nexus of the partnership between the universities, then partnerships tend to unravel. In this regard, partnerships built upon interpersonal relationships are embedded enough in the network of individuals but not enough in the institutions. In this sense, instead of individuality, sustainable partnership building is about '*team playing*', which suggests the significance of multiple engagement in the established interpersonal relationships. However, to make such '*team playing*' (Interviewee 9, England) or multiple engagement happen, the institution has to work hard at building trust, thus regaining belief and engagement from individual academics on the ground. This is where strategic planning should come in, with the aim of embedding interpersonal relationships not just in individual networks but also institutional structures. However, this research showed that there are subtle difference in how the strategic and contingent is linked through interpersonal relationships between the two institutions in the UK and China.

The story told from English side: an emphasis on 'people'

...it would be nice to say that partnerships develop along some kind of scientific

arrangement, but they don't. At the end of the day, it's people to people. They are not academics. They are not professors. They are just people like anybody else...

(Interviewee 1, International Coordinator in Nursing, England)

As exemplified above, there is a sense of mistrust between the institution and the individual regarding what makes partnerships sustainable. The interview data indicates that most English participants distrusted the inter-institutional relationships developed alongside 'some kind of scientific arrangement', especially those driven by student numbers and thus financial returns. Instead, they held a strong belief in the inter-personal relationships developed after a chance encounter between 'people', as stated above, '[a]t the end of the day, it's people to people'. This argument was made by many English participants: sustainable partnerships are constructed by human relationships and this is linked to their criticisms of university partnerships mainly being commercial relationships, which is not perceived as 'a strong basis for anything':

...a lot of international university relationships are about how we can make more money, we can get more students by doing this, which is not really a strong basis for anything, it seems to me. Because you are not actually developing what I would call a human relationship (Interviewee 2, Professor in Education, Deputy Dean of Faculty, England).

This professor has built up longstanding relationships with colleagues in Hong Kong and good working relationships with colleagues at Australian and American universities. He suggests that the sustainability of partnership relies on an ethical relationship or 'human relationship' rather than on a 'commercial relationship' which is driven by self-interest. For this professor, if a partnership aims for sustainability, it has to go beyond a 'commercial relationship', moving towards a 'human relationship', as is emphasized, 'you have to know the person at the other end'. Such distrust in the institution is also expressed by another academic in Education:

I still have a sneaky feeling or suspicion that sustaining the relationship will come down to the individuals, not to what institutions do (Interviewee 9, Reader in Education, England).

Either way both academics academic argue that it is human relationships and individuals rather than university relationships and institutions that make partnerships sustainable. This is because, as an International Coordinator points out, it is those human relationships which make partnerships 'meaningful' and thus 'sustainable':

I have found that the most meaningful, the ones we have been able to sustain, tend to be from the staff member that worked with other universities, you know. We have very, very close contacts with whether as students, or PhD students, or as member staff... Again speaking from my experiences the most successful element has been the relationships between member staff here and member staff there (Interviewee 14, International Coordinator in Arts, England).

In common with the majority of academics, some managers with the specific role of developing partnerships also underline the significance of human relationships in constructing sustainable partnerships. Having those relationships appears to indicate having earned trust for each other, thus leaving a legacy for future partnerships, as is argued by one participant:

The only way that it is sustainable is through those personal relationships that you built, on the trust that you built. Um, I have developed a number of partnerships in China. I also now have a number of people I counted them as my friends, not just business associates (Interviewee 6, Manager in Business, England).

However, human relationships are carried by people. When people distrust the institution, they may thus be unwilling to embed their human relationships within the institutions, as is explained by a professor in Engineering:

This is about strong personal friendships and activity that has gone on for years until the professor died, then it stopped. There is no other reason that we go on today. When individuals go, it stops (Interviewee 4, Professor in Engineering, England).

Those partnerships unravel because they are well-embedded in individual networks but not adequately embedded within the institution; the reason for that appears to be ascribed to a lack of motivation for their individual networks to ‘have an impact beyond you as an individual’, as is explained by another participant:

...I don't think I've been embedded enough in the institution with other people. So that's what I was going to move on to say that as I grow older, I think I become more aware that if you really want a network to have an impact beyond you as an individual, you need to make sure other people are involved with you from the start, and that you don't just call them in later when you need help. You actually try to build in their support. So increasingly, it's about team playing (Interviewee 9, Reader in Education, England).

In this sense, instead of individuality, ‘it’s about team playing’, which suggests the significance of multiple engagement in sustainable partnerships building. However, to make such ‘team playing’ or multiple engagement happen, the institution has to work hard at building trust, thus retaining belief and engagement from individual academics on the ground. The discontinuity in terms of people who are involved in the ongoing partnerships in the institution may lead international partnerships to stagnate, as in the case of an unsatisfactory handover between predecessors and successors. This is echoed by another senior academic:

A properly sustainable partnership shouldn't be one that resets the partnership when I left, should be one that somebody comes in and takes over (Interviewee 11, Professor in Nursing, Head of Department, England).

According to this professor, senior academics might exert equal influence over sustainable partnerships building. The arrangement of a successor can be one of the strategies for embedding established human relationships in the schools and faculties. As we shall see in the story told from the Chinese side, there are other strategies consolidating the established links, such as sending individuals abroad to strengthen the established partnerships between institutions. This not only highlights the role of continuous human contact in sustaining international partnerships between institutions, but also the agency of senior academics regarding sustainable partnership building.

The story told from Chinese side: a reliance on 'seniors'

...either top-down or bottom-up approach to international partnerships can be both effective and ineffective...But all the international partnership programmes take root in the schools and faculties...To this end, there's a need to have dean[s] or deputy dean[s] with such vision in those schools and faculties...The effectiveness is not subject to the approach, instead, it depends on the constituents of the approach, including people and resource.

(Interviewee 18, Professor in Education, Associate Dean of School, China).

As exemplified above, unlike the English participants who expressed a strong sense of distrust between the institution and the individual regarding what makes partnerships sustainable, most Chinese participants instead gave an impression of interrelation between the institution and the individual through highlighting the vision of 'senior' academics in embedding partnerships in the schools and faculties. They highlighted the particular roles of 'people' such as 'dean[s] or deputy dean[s]' in making use of the legacy of interpersonal relationships for building sustainable partnerships in the schools and faculties, contrary to English participants emphasizing the agency of 'people' going beyond 'academics', 'professors' or any other titles in developing and embedding human relationships in the individual networks. In other words, Chinese participants in this research seem more reliant on academics with administrative posts regarding sustainable partnership building, including those working in the home institutions as well as those who settle abroad, all of whom play a vital role in connecting and maintaining academics links between the home and partner institutions. This greater emphasis placed on the agency of 'seniors' regarding the chances of establishing interpersonal relationships through contingent networking, thus developing international partnerships:

Before I came to this school, about 5 years ago, there was a Professor in charge of international exchange and cooperation. He worked in N Company for several decades before he came here when he retired, so he knew a lot of people. I was in America for 22 years and worked in M Company for 15 years, so I also know a lot of people (Interviewee 22, Professor in Biochemistry, Associate Dean of School, China).

One of the reasons that senior academics exert more influence is given by a Professor in Education.

...the senior academics exert more influence than the faculty staff because they have more opportunities of visiting abroad and networking (Interviewee 19, Professor in Education, Dean of School, China).

In addition to developing international partnerships, there is a recurring sense that the Chinese participants place more emphasis on the agency of senior academics in sustaining international partnerships through embedding human relationships in the institutional structure, thus sustaining partnerships. To this end, there seems to be corresponding strategies aimed at consolidating the established links, such as sending individuals abroad to strengthen the established partnerships between institutions, as an associate professor recalls how their partnership with L University has sustained through being sent to study abroad:

I was sent to L University to pursue my PhD in 2001. After I finished my PhD I came back and worked in this department. My supervisor in L University then was planning to sustain this PhD program or this partnership, so from a sustainable point of view they expected us to come back to China after we finished our PhDs and to continuously develop this programme through selecting and sending excellent student there...In this sense, our partnership sustains and become a virtuous circle (Interviewee 24, Associate Professor in History, China).

It is not just ‘senior’ academics working in the home institution who are believed to exert more influence by sending individuals abroad to develop and strengthen human relationships. Another professor, with experience in coordinating international exchange programs in this Chinese university, emphasizes the significance of Chinese academics with managerial posts working in partner institutions abroad in sustaining the partnership through continuous human contact:

...to be honest, a lot of international exchange programmes are made because of the Chinese within them as the nexus. That is to say, if this professor is out from Mainland China, he will always visit back, which could create exchange opportunities, say, in different conferences. And this professor has to be a one with a managerial post. If he or she is just a professor, it may not be that helpful (Interviewee 27, International Coordinator in Ocean and Earth Sciences, China).

This focuses attention on the significance of the Chinese transnational academics as the vital nexus in sustaining partnerships. A Professor in Education and Associate Dean of School at a Chinese university comments on how their partnership with C University sustains through a Chinese professor working there:

Our relationship with that American university, has mainly depended on a Chinese professor who is working there (Interviewee 18, Professor in Education, Associate Dean of School, China).

Notably, Chinese transnational academics appear to be making a significant contribution to maintaining the academic links between the home and overseas institution, and this has

become apparent in the literature. As de Wit, Gacel-Avila, & Jones (2017) argue, the increasingly complex global mobility flows offer '*new opportunities for those able and willing to access them*'. Such opportunities make it possible for a growing group of Chinese academics to not only study and visit abroad, but also to work abroad as a Chinese diaspora to maintain academic links with the home institutions.

Discussion and conclusion

The major findings from this paper have demonstrated how individuals themselves in both institutions in the UK and China make sense of their construction of sustainable partnerships through interpersonal relationships and what the nuanced differences are in the agency of developing and sustaining partnerships in both countries. The story told from English and Chinese sides presents a shared construction of sustainable international partnerships in higher education. Both the English and Chinese participants in this research have strongly expressed the view that it is those inter-personal human relationships built upon shared interests and ethical qualities that make partnerships sustainable. Interpersonal relationships are perceived to be a strong basis for interweaving sustainable partnerships. This is because there is an inherent research interest for individual academics to engage in their disciplinary networks and a built-in mutual understanding, respect and trust within those human relationships developed through contingent activities, such as studying, visiting or working abroad. This finding echoes previous studies which have indicated that interpersonal human relationships are seen as the central role in building sustainable international partnerships in higher education (Denman, 2004; Eddy, 2010; Hayhoe et al., 2013; Leng, 2014). Moreover, this shared understanding across two universities in both countries is argued to go beyond any international and institutional differences between the UK and China, thus creating wider possibilities of constructing sustainable partnerships through interpersonal relationships.

On the other hand, as presented in this study, there are nuanced differences in who exerts more agency or influence in developing interpersonal relationships and thus sustaining international partnerships. In England, sustainable partnership seems constructed amid the distrust in the institution by participants as a response with frustration, cynicism and doubt about the institutional approach to partnerships driven by income generation, arguing that it is human relationships between '*people*' that make partnerships sustainable. Thus in the English context partnerships were embedded in the individual networks rather than in the institutional structure, possibly making them more fragile. In China, meanwhile, sustainable partnership appears constructed in the context with a heavy reliance on the particular roles of '*people*' – 'senior' academics - working in either home or partner universities in developing and sustaining interpersonal relationships and thus partnerships.

To explain why senior academics could contribute to sustainable partnership building, it may be helpful to apply the idea of 'boundary spanners' (Williams, 2013) in discussing the particular power and agency through which international partnerships built upon human relationships could be embedded within the institution. The notion of 'boundary spanners' places a specific emphasis on the role of agency in the context of joint working, integration, collaboration and coordination. However, in this study senior academics in the schools and

faculties serving their disciplinary development could be considered as a particular kind of ‘boundary spanners’ who are not a dedicated cadre but engage in boundary spanning activities as an integral part of their professional, managerial and leadership roles. Those ‘boundary spanners’ bridge, negotiate and build multi-engaged relationships in the established partnerships, thus reducing the risk of becoming heavily dependent on one key person to sustain partnerships. Having those boundary spanners in the institution can be suggested as the key to building multi-engaged relationships, thus sustainable partnerships in higher education. But this is also dependent on the individual agency of that particular person and the institutional space where such empowerment is encouraged. In this regard, this study has shed light on the possibilities of linking the strategic and contingent through interpersonal relationships, and senior academics as boundary spanners appear to play a significant role in embedding interpersonal relationships not just in the individual networks but also in the institutional structures.

Biographies

Dr Jie Ma has a PhD which focused on an analysis of internationalisation strategies in China and the UK and she is currently based at the University of Hull, UK. Her research interests are based around internationalisation of higher education, particularly in comparative perspectives.

Prof Catherine Montgomery is Professor of International Higher Education at the University of Bath, UK. Her research interests relate to international and transnational higher education in China and East Asia, mobilities and immobilities in higher education and internationalisation of curriculum and knowledge.

Appendix

Interviewees	Sites	Roles	Disciplines/Departments/Programs
01	England	International Coordinator	Nursing
02	England	Deputy Dean	Education
03	England	Professor	Engineering
04	England	Head	Quality Office
05	England	Head	Languages, Linguistics and Cultures
06	England	Administrative staff	Business
07	England	Professor	Nursing
08	England	Lecturer	English as a Foreign Language
09	England	Reader	Education
10	England	Deputy Director	Partnership Office
11	England	Head	Nursing
12	England	Deputy Director	International Office
13	England	Associate Dean	Science and Engineering
14	England	International Coordinator	Arts
15	England	Senior Lecturer	Environment
16	England	Head	Engineering
17	England	Vice-Chancellor (former)	University
18	China	Associate Dean	Education
19	China	Dean	Education

20	China	Pro-Vice-Chancellor	University
21	China	International Coordinator	Multilateral Student Exchange Program
22	China	Associate Dean	Public Health
23	China	Administrative staff	Economic
24	China	Associate Professor	International Relations
25	China	Administrative staff	Economic
26	China	Director (China)	Confucius Institute
27	China	International Coordinator	Ocean and Earth Sciences
28	China	Dean (former)	Ocean and Earth Sciences
29	China	Associate Dean	Foreign Languages and Cultures
30	China	Deputy Director (former)	International Office
31	China	Deputy Director	International Office

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